AMERICAN JOURNAL OF EDUCATION AND LEARNING
ISSN: 2996-5128 (online) | ResearchBib (IF) = 9.918 IMPACT FACTOR
Volume-3| Issue-5| 2025 Published: |30-05-2025|

NEW APPEARANCES OF MYSTICISM IN THE WEST

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15427426

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Annotasion

This article discusses the reasons for the growing interest in Sufism in the Western world today and its compatibility with the traditions and principles of Islam and its differences. Also, the history of the origin of the issue of Neo-Sufism and information about its members is given. The importance of classical Sufism and modern orders today is discussed.

Key words

Neo-Sufism, Sufism, Sufi, Classical Sufism, Tidjania, Zikr

It is widely acknowledged that European interest in Sufi ideas began during the transition to the Middle Ages. The spiritual teachings expressed in poetic form by figures such as the ascetic woman Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya (d. 801), the Egyptian mystic Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1235), and the classical Persian poets Saʿdī of Shiraz (d. 1292) and Hāfez (d. 1390) gained considerable popularity in Europe. Despite the longstanding mutual influence between Eastern and Western civilizations in fields such as medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy, it was during the Renaissance that European advancement in scientific, technological, and eventually cultural domains began to outpace that of the East. During the colonial era, the Muslim world became a focal point of European curiosity. In the early twentieth century, European travelers and researchers began photographing Muslim dervishes and wandering ascetics (qalandars) clad in patched garments and exhibiting diverse appearances. For Europeans, these images represented the very embodiment of the ascetics and libertine mystics described by Hāfez in his verses, residing in the symbolic ruins of the tavern (kharābāt). This form of "ethnographic exoticism" came to reflect the Western perception of elements within Islamic mysticism.

It was around this period that the practice of wearing Sufi cloaks (khirqas) began to emerge among the earliest European neophytes. Notably, women were

among the first to adopt this practice. One prominent example is the journalist and explorer Isabelle Eberhardt (1877–1904), who operated in Algeria and participated in military operations on the side of the Arabs during their resistance against the French army. At the age of 23, she undertook the spiritual path (sulūk) and became affiliated with the Qadiriyya Sufi order in Tunisia.

Another influential figure who left a significant impact on Europeans during this period was Johann Gustaf Agelii (1869–1917), who adopted the name Ivan Aguéli in 1889. In 1903, he traveled to Egypt with the young Italian physician Enrico Insabato. There, he met ʿAbd al-Rahman al-Kabīr, a leading figure of the Shadhiliyya order. Under his influence, Aguéli became a disciple of the order and was given the name ʿAbd al-Hādī al-Maghribī. Under this name, he published numerous newspaper articles and books related to Sufism. His primary intellectual focus was the study of the works of Ibn ʿArabī. In 1911, he returned to Paris and went on to establish the Akbariyya order, named in honor of Ibn ʿArabī, who is often referred to by the honorific title "Shaykh al-Akbar" (The Greatest Master), a title that had a profound influence on al-Maghribī.

However, by the early 20th century, Sufi practices in the West had become increasingly theatricalized and institutionalized, often losing their original spiritual depth. Nevertheless, they sparked unprecedented resonance in European society. It was during this same period that a number of individuals, influenced by Aguéli's ideas, converted to Islam. Simultaneously, in the Muslim world, processes of modernization began to intensify under the influence of Western thought. In accordance with the spirit of the age, these reformist ideas also began to exert a noticeable influence within Sufi circles. Calls for the reinterpretation of classical Sufi traditions have become increasingly common in contemporary discourse.

The term "neo-Sufism", frequently encountered in contemporary academic literature, was first introduced by Fazlur Rahman. As stated in his work, the early neo-Sufis were influenced by traditionalists (Ahl al-Hadith), particularly by the views of Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 1350). According to these perspectives, Sufism had lost its essential appeal and metaphysical substance. A central premise of the neo-Sufi movement, as Rahman articulates, is that Sufi practice should not be confined to individual spirituality alone, but rather directed toward the "social and spiritual reconstruction of Muslim society."

According to Rahman and other scholars, one of the defining features of neo-Sufism is the deliberate abandonment of certain classical traditions. Among the most prominent practices that neo-Sufists tend to reject are: samāʿ (spiritual music and dance), jahrī dhikr (vocal remembrance of God), veneration of saints,

pilgrimage to shrines, the doctrine of waḥdat al-wujūd (Unity of Being) associated with Ibn ʿArabī, and such esoteric concepts as jamʿ (mystical union) and fanāʾ (annihilation of the self), which are upheld in classical Sufi thought.

According to Dr. Yusuf Öztel of the Faculty of Theology at Uludağ University, the most prominent figures of neo-Sufism include Ahmad al-Tijānī (1737–1815), the Algerian founder of the Tijāniyya order; Ahmad ibn Idrīs al-Fāsī (1749–1837); al-Ḥājj ʿUmar al-Fūtī (1793–1864) of North Africa; and finally, Muḥammad ʿAlī al-Sanūsī (1787–1859), the distinguished student of Ahmad ibn Idrīs and founder of the Sanūsiyya order. [1]

In his article, Dr. Yusuf Öztel points out that there exists a fundamental distinction between classical Sufism and neo-Sufism concerning the concept of ʿilm al-yaqīn (knowledge of certainty). Classical Sufi authorities generally accept the possibility of seeing the Prophet Muhammad in a true dream (ruʾyā ṣāliḥa). In contrast, neo-Sufis claim that posthumous encounters with the Prophet occur in a living, direct form. This assertion is based on their belief that the Prophet did not die in the conventional sense but continues to live in another form.

Furthermore, neo-Sufis are characterized by their rejection of ijtihād (independent legal reasoning) and their prohibition of following any of the established madhāhib (legal schools). They justify this by asserting that since the Prophet is alive, it is improper to follow the interpretations of other scholars. They view the reasoning of traditional jurists and theologians as flawed and, therefore, discourage adherence to their doctrines. Additionally, neo-Sufis often regard the true Sufi as being directly inspired by divine revelation (ilhām), implying that such a figure acts as an exclusive intermediary between the believer and the Prophet himself.

Neo-Sufis often assert that the core of their dhikr (remembrance) and wird (devotional litanies) originates directly from the Prophet Muhammad or from al-Khiḍr, who is regarded in Sufi tradition as a spiritual guide. According to Dr. Yusuf Öztel, such claims reflect an implicit tendency toward asserting access to divine knowledge (ʿilm ilāhī). In contemporary scholarship, the phenomenon of neo-Sufism is increasingly being examined from a critical perspective by Orientalists. This is largely due to the ambiguity and inconsistency in defining the term "neo-Sufi," which has led to a variety of interpretations and classifications.

Several scholars have addressed this issue in their research. For example, R. S. O'Fahey and Bernd Radtke, in their co-authored article "Neo-Sufism Reconsidered", emphasize that traditional Orientalist studies have mainly focused on the philosophical dimensions of Sufism, particularly the theoretical doctrines of medieval mystics, and on interpreting these doctrines within broader intellectual

frameworks. By contrast, classical Sufi sources tend to highlight practical aspects of Sufism, such as dhikr, samāʿ (spiritual audition), pilgrimage (ziyārah), and the institutional structures of Sufi orders (ṭarīqas).

One of the most contentious issues for neo-Sufis is the concept of the "Seal of the Saints" (Khātam al-Awliyāʾ). Although this subject was thoroughly discussed by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and has received various scholarly interpretations over time, it continues to lack a unified consensus among neo-Sufi thinkers, remaining an open and debated topic.

The reason for this, as scholars have noted, is that neo-Sufis often reject rigid frameworks regarding veneration of saints (awliyāʾ) and the concept of sainthood (walāya). In fact, they tend to either downplay or outright deny these doctrines whenever possible. Some researchers even describe the concept of "neo-Sufism" as a form of "modified Sufism," arguing that it aligns more closely with Western esotericism than with traditional Islamic frameworks [2].

These scholars assert that the growing interest in Islamic mystical teachings within Western popular culture during the mid- to late-20th century emerged in the context of a broader fascination with Eastern spiritual traditions and the rise of youth subcultures. Neo-Sufi proponents, however, not only distance themselves from Islamic orthodoxy, but also resist alignment with Western secular values, creating a complex position between two worlds.

One early figure associated with neo-Sufi tendencies was Hazrat Inayat Khan, a descendant of a Muslim family and a Shaykh of the Chishtiyya order in India. From a young age, he demonstrated an intense interest in religious knowledge. His intellectual pursuits led him to study Vedic scriptures, Islamic treatises, and Christian theological sources. This extended spiritual search eventually brought him to the path of Sufism, where he found what he believed to be a greater sense of spiritual freedom compared to other religious traditions. Under the guidance of Shaykh Sayyid Muhammad Madani, he began formal training in the Chishtiyya order. During this formative period, Inayat Khan developed the idea of integrating a universalist vision into Sufism and spreading it more broadly in the Western world. [3]

According to Inayat Khan, neo-Sufism represents a unique spiritual phenomenon that transcends both religious and national boundaries. He emphasized the view that truth exists in every religion, and ultimately, that truth is God. Based on the idea that a Sufi is not necessarily required to adhere strictly to any single religion, he laid the foundation for a new direction within the Sufi tradition. [4]

Inayat Khan describes God as the Creator of both humanity and the universe, and refers to Him as the Absolute. In neo-Sufism, God is understood as the unifying totality that encompasses all beings. Such views clearly diverge from classical Sufi doctrines. Furthermore, Inayat Khan believed that the human soul does not perish with the body but is revived after physical death. He attempted to explain the resurrection of the soul in a way that aligns more closely with Christian theological interpretations.[5]

As a conclusion, the reasons for the acceptance of Islam by the Western population through Sufism can be summarized as follows:

Spiritual and emotional void in Western society: The materialistic lifestyle in the West leads to dissatisfaction with life, prompting individuals to seek spiritual fulfillment and gravitate toward Sufism, which is based on the spiritual principles of Islam.

Unique characteristics of Sufism and spiritual orders: The fact that Sufi ideas are accessible to individuals from all walks of life, addressing spiritual issues and helping individuals achieve tranquility, has repeatedly been validated and warmly embraced.

Provision of a supportive social and initiatory environment for new Muslims: Sufi communities offer newcomers to Islam the opportunity to develop new skills and receive support, creating an environment where they do not feel isolated. This fosters a sense of worth and belonging in society. For those transitioning from feelings of despair to an active life, Sufism provides motivation, and its members highly value this aspect.

Conversations with individuals associated with Sufism in the West show that they view Sufism as a practical part of Islam and are pleased to derive significant strength from it.

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ISSN: 2996-5128 (online) | ResearchBib (IF) = 9.918 IMPACT FACTOR
Volume-3| Issue-5| 2025 Published: |30-05-2025|

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